

April 1, 2019

The Honourable Rachel Notley
307 Legislature Building
10800-97 Ave.
Edmonton, AB

Dear Premier Notley,

I have always been a vehement supporter of public health care. I stand with the Danielle Martins of the world in my belief that health care is a basic human right that should be accessible to all irrespective of one's degree of wealth or ability to pay. That is, indeed, the social doctrine that sets us apart from our neighbors to the south. Until this year, I felt the same way about education, which has long been known to be an important social determinant of health. That changed once my daughter entered Grade 2 at Red Deer Lake (RDL) School. Next year, I am sending her to private school. Just as I so vehemently defend everyone's right for equal access to health, I will defend my right to pay for a better education.

Let me explain. Without any stakeholder engagement or consultation and no advance notice to parents, teachers and administration at RDL decided to remove the wall between the grade 2 classrooms and combine two full classes into a classroom of 47 students. Can you imagine 47 students sitting within the confines of carpet time? The idea behind this can of sardines philosophy was to maximize "collective efficacy", but I would argue that teachers are much more able to practice collective efficacy in classrooms when they are not managing higher needs students among an audience of 47 children. In fact, the concept of collective efficacy simply means that teachers understand that it is their judgements and beliefs (such as having appropriately high expectations of their students) that actually have the most significant impact on learning (Hattie, 2009)¹.

Over the course of the year, it became evident that many students were struggling with this model. Numerous parents have anecdotally noted a shift in their child's sense of wellbeing. Children this age are not able to voice the reasons for their sense of unease, and thus the effects manifest through behaviour. **Two students in the class have been formally diagnosed with an anxiety disorder that is directly attributable to the classroom environment, and others have required adaptations like periods of seclusion in order to cope. Five students have left, or will be leaving RDL altogether.** RDL has been an integral part of the rural communities south of Calgary since 1887 when it was just a one-room schoolhouse. Second and third generation families are choosing to leave this place that has been so important to their family's history.

As parents, we have tried voicing our concerns, both individually and collectively, with the teachers and administration. In a meeting with the Foothills School Division (FSD) and RDL administration, our review of the literature on class size was shot down as "weak" and an inaccurate depiction of the current views on what makes a school great. Commentary on my scientific abilities aside, there

was no acknowledgement that there even was a problem. Half-hearted attempts to placate parents by shutting the wall 1/3 of the way worked to offset some parent's concerns. However, there are a few of us who chose to continue to advocate for our children.

A subsequent letter from the FSD told us that they are "of the firm opinion that there is no further need for collective dialogue". I find this stance obstructionist and contradictory to the *Framework for Learning* that was published by the FSD, which states that success requires a combination "of professional judgement about what each student needs and a professional body of knowledge about evidence based practices that are most effective for student learning". While I may disagree with their professional judgement (and granted I have no formal training in education), it is clear that this model is in no way grounded in evidence and is therefore in direct contravention of the standards to which they are committed.

Following this, I wrote a letter directly appealing to the Board of Trustees. I was told that my request for an appeal for their review into this matter did not meet criteria under the *School Act*; was sent a copy of the newly minted *Administrative Procedure 151: Parental/Guardian Complaints or Concerns*; and was redirected back to FSD administration. I then wrote to Minister Eggen who did not feel he had the power to intervene and stated that under the *School Act* "a parent may appeal a decision to the school board where that decision significantly affects the education of the student". Let me recap: The FSD refused to discuss this; the board and their lawyers redirected me to the FSD; and the Minister redirected me to the board. It's all quite dizzying and frankly, extremely concerning. **If neither the Board of Trustees or the Minister has the power or desire to intervene on behalf of my child, then who does?**

It appears as though I have exhausted my options, which brings me to my decision to send my daughter to private school. In hospitals, patients have the right to a fair and transparent process when they bring forward a concern. This regulated process can involve multiple levels of review by parties who have no direct involvement in the concern being reviewed, and if the patient remains dissatisfied, review by a third party Ombudsman to ensure the patient has been afforded due process. This is obviously not the case in education. Despite being a public service, there is a **complete and utter lack of transparency and accountability** among those who claim power over the well being and future success of our children.

So I ask you, Premier Notley; as we are on the eve of another election, **how do you plan to address this gap?** For starters, we need boards and trustees that take their responsibility to enact the *School Act* in good faith and without reservation. An Alberta Education Ombudsman would help ensure parents are afforded a fair and transparent process. We also need class sizes that better reflect the learning needs of students, as outlined by the Auditor General Report. This report, which was released by Alberta Education in Feb 2018, concluded that smaller class sizes (the target is 17 students) significantly impacted student

academic achievement. **The Grade 2 class size at RDL is more than two and half times that recommended by Alberta Education.**

Finally, our children deserve **more accountability for teachers and educators**, particularly around issues affecting their well being. After all, a good education should be a right for everyone. We live in a “hand-up” society; it is in our collective psyche to help each other up so we all make it to the top. It’s the Canadian way. Until there is some semblance of accountability in education however, I will take every opportunity afforded to me to ensure my child gets the best private education possible.

Respectfully yours,

Dr. Yael Moussadji, MD, FRCPC, MHSc

Dr. Moussadji is an Emergency Physician in Calgary, AB. The views expressed in this letter are hers alone, and do not reflect the opinions of Alberta Health Services or any professional associations.

ⁱ Hattie, J. (2009). Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. New York, NY: Routledge